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ABSTRACT

Although the literature links the presence of a confidant with successful adaptation to loss, and widowhood with a blurring of personal identity, the relationship between these two areas has seldom been explored. To examine the relationship between the presence of a confidant and adaptation in widowhood, 70 women from northeastern Connecticut who were presently widowed and had not remarried nor were engaged to be remarried were interviewed. (Additional respondents from widows' groups in the state brought the sample to 83). Widows' ages ranged from 22 to 74, with an average age of 48.3. Average age at the time of death of spouse was 44.3. Interview items were both structured and open-ended questions. The Total Positive Score (POS) of the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, and an Adaptation Index, based on responses to the open-ended questions, were used for data analysis. Length of duration of the confidant relationship and sex of the confidant were examined. Overall, the results indicated that the presence of a confidant helps buffer women against the loss of a spouse. Contrary to expectations, women who had developed a new confidant since their husband's death were higher in adaptation than those who had confidants of long acquaintance. Further, male confidants served as more potent enhancers of widows' adaptation. The findings suggest that the relationship between intimacy and identity (from Erikson's theory of personality development) may be related to identity stability in widowhood. (LLL)

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Presence of a Confidant and Adaptation in Widowhood

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Since the pioneering work of Lowenthal and Haven (1968) attention has been drawn to the importance of a confidant in buffering the losses of aging. Although subsequent work (Lowenthal & Weiss, 1976; Weiss, 1977) has helped clarify the realtionship of intimacy to mental well-being, the underlying psychological processes are still unclear. The relationship of having a confidant to the process of recovery from loss of spouse is even less clear. However, it was discovered that there is a body of literature linking successful adaptation to loss with the presence of a confidant, and a body of literature linking widowhood with the blurring of personal identity (Lopata, 1973; Parkes, 1972), yet the relationship between these two areas has seldom been connected. This is especially surprising in view of the fact that Erikson's theory of personality development, from which the identity concept has been taken (Erikson, 1968), postulates that the developmental task of learning to enter into intimate relationships is closely related to the task of identity achievement. Although Erikson implies that intimacy must be with a person of the opposite sex, Gilligan (1979) and others have argued that personality development is more relational. It would seem that, at least for women, intimacy with the same sex, in the form of a confidant relationship, might well be related to identity development, as well as identity maintenance.

Kilpatrick (1975) has suggested that identity is relatively unstable because it requires a threefold continuity: A "continuity of significant others; a continuity with one's past self; a continuity with one's anticipated future self" (p. 30). A confidant could well provide support in all three of these areas, but particularly for the first two. The nature of the confidant relationship, however, would determine how much identity support would be provided in each of the three areas. For example, a confidant known over a number of years, prior to the death of one's spouse, might provide more identity stability than a recently-acquired confidant. In order to clarify these, and related questions concerning adaptation in widowhood, this study was undertaken.

Sample. Names of potential respondents were selected from the death records of the town clerk from six towns in northeastern Connecticut. Letters requesting an interview were sent to 211 women whose husbands had died in the past five years. Responses were received from 138 (65%); 62 letters were returned as undeliverable (29%); 11 letters (5%) generated no response. Of those responding, 83 (60%) agreed to be interviewed. From these, women were selected who met the criteria of having been once married, presently being widowed and not re-married nor engaged to be married. All 70 women meeting these requirements were interviewed. Additional respondents were solicited from widow self-help groups in the state, bringing the total sample to 83. Widow's ages ranged from 22 to 74, with an average of 48.3. Average age at the time of death of spouse was 44.3.

Method. Interviews, which were conducted in the homes of the widows, consisted of structured and open-ended questions, and took 45 minutes to an hour. Open-ended questions, which were developed in extensive pre-testing, probed for present adaptation, as well as information on social network and support. Structured questions included background demographic information, and in addition respondents were asked to fill out the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (Fitts, 1965).

The Tennessee Self-Concept Scale contains a number of sub-scales, but the Total Positive Score (POS), which measures overall level of self-esteem, and serves as a good indication of psychological well-being, is the index used in the present data analysis. As a second criteria variable, an Adaptation Index was constructed from 12 open-ended questions relating to respondents' sense of personal well-being. Responses to each of the 12 questions were rated independently by two trained coders. Scores were summed to form an Adaptation Index score for each respondent. The test of inter-coder reliability yielded a correlation coefficient of +.88.

Results. Scores on the Total Positive Score (POS) were quite high for this sample; their mean score of 357 was significantly higher ($P < .01$) than the national norm of 346 published for this scale (Fitts, 1965). This perhaps reflects the relatively high SES of this group, as well as the fact that there was evidence of considerable social support for many of the women; that is, a support network consisting of widowed friends, children, neighbors, parents, and professionals. In addition to

these social supports, 61% of all interviewed widows had a confidant at the present time (Lowenthal & Haven, 1968, reported that 65% of their female sample had a confidant, but this included married women who listed their husbands in this category.)

A comparison of the scores of widows having a confidant with those having no confidant are indicated in Table 1. Scores on the POS can be seen as almost identical for the two groups, but scores on the Adaptation Index were found to be significantly higher for the widows who had a confidant.

Table 1

Tennessee POS Scores by Confidant Group

Group	N	Mean	s.d.	t
No Confidant	29	355.7	32.8	.27
Confidant	49	357.9	36.2	

Adaptation Index Scores by Confidant Group

No Confidant	32	3.16	.92	2.29*
Confidant	51	3.67	1.09	

*P < .05

In order to examine the quality of the confidant relationship more closely, the length of duration of the confidant relationship was determined. Of the 51 women who had a confidant, 37 knew the confidant before their husband's death ("Old" confidants), and 14 came to know their confidant only after spouse death ("New" confidants). An analysis of variance

indicated no significant difference among groups on the POS (F = .27, 2/75 d.f.), but near-significant difference (P < .10) on the Adaptation Index (F = 3.06, 2/80 d.f.). Subsequent analysis indicated mean scores of those reporting a new confidant were significantly higher on this Index than those having no confidant (Table 2).

Table 2

Adaptation Index Score by Confidant Group

Group	N	Mean	s.d.	t
No Confidant	32	3.16	.92	
				1.72
Old Confidant	51	3.67	1.09	
				1.02
New Confidant	14	3.93	1.14	
				2.24*
No Confidant	32	3.16	.92	

*P < .05

In an attempt to further examine the nature of the confidant relationship and its impact on adaptation, sex of confidant was next analyzed. Males were named as confidant by 15 widows, and 36 named females. As indicated in Table 3, the ANOVA failed to indicate a significant difference among groups on the Tennessee POS measure, but they were found to differ significantly on the Adaptation Index. Group means for the latter variable, along with t tests between groups, indicate that the greatest difference is found for those widows with male confidants.

Table 3

Tennessee POS Scores by Sex-designated Confidant

Due to	df	ss	ms	F ratio
Factor	2	3559.	1789.	1.49
Error	75	89595.	1195.	
Total	77	93154.		

Adaptation Index by Sex-designated Confidant

Factor	2	11.17	5.58	5.62**
Error	80	79.51	.99	
Total	82	90.68		

Mean Adaptation Index by Sex-designated Confidant

Group	N	Mean	s.d.	t
No Confidant	32	3.16	.92	
				3.39**
Male Confidant	15	4.20	1.01	
				2.40*
Female Confidant	36	3.44	1.05	
				1.20
No Confidant	32	3.16	.92	

**P < .01 *P < .05

Discussion. Overall these data support earlier findings that the presence of a confidant helps buffer women against the loss of spouse, at least on the Adaptation Index coded from open-ended questions. The POS of the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, although scores were in the expected direction, failed to show significant difference between groups. It could well be that open-ended questions, which were developed to tap adaptation related specifically to widowhood, are a more sensitive instrument for this purpose than the standardized POS items.

The finding that persons who had developed a new confidant since their husband's death were higher in adaptation than those who had confidants of long acquaintance came as a surprise. In terms of Kilpatrick's (1975) formulation, one might expect longer-term relationships to provide more ego identity support, and make adaptation in widowhood less traumatic. The further finding that male confidants serve as a more potent enhancer of widow adaptation is equally unanticipated. This suggests that the relationship between intimacy and identity, which is a central component of Erikson's (1968) theory of personality development, may be related to identity stability in widowhood as well. In particular, it might be that women who lose their husbands are able to establish a new identity if they first have an intimate relationship with a new person, and their level of adaptation may be further enhanced if that person is a male. Although this conjecture will need to be tested on another sample than that from which it was generated, this study suggests that adaptation to widowhood might best be viewed within the larger context of personality development.

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